

---

Douglas S. Massey

---

---

# COMMENTARY

---

John Mollenkopf's paper uses data from two sources to consider patterns of assimilation among second-generation immigrants in New York City. From the 2000 Public Use Microdata Sample for New York, he compiles data on household type by generation, race, and ethnicity, and shows how household income and school enrollment are conditioned by variation in these variables. He then turns to the Immigrant Second Generation in Metropolitan New York study, on which he is a principal investigator, to extend his analysis beyond what can be accomplished using census data alone.

By relating race and ethnicity to family structure, income, and education, Mollenkopf seeks to challenge the hypothesis of segmented assimilation formulated by Portes and Zhou (1993) and elaborated by Portes and Rumbaut (2001). He finds that African racial origin does not necessarily trump class, family background, gender, and other factors in determining socioeconomic outcomes, and on this basis concludes that segmented assimilation is unsupported as a theoretical explanation. From the data presented in the paper, however, I do not believe that he is justified in reaching this conclusion, for two major reasons.

First, by reducing the hypothesis of segmented assimilation to the simple idea that race trumps other factors in determining trajectories among the second generation, Mollenkopf transforms what is very broad and subtle theory into a stylized caricature of itself. In fact, the model of segmented assimilation posits that immigrant adaptation and integration are

“structured” by specific elements of an immigrant group's auspices of departure and context of reception. Race and racial discrimination are just one of several structuring factors mentioned by Portes and his colleagues. The auspices of departure revolve around the original motivation for international migration. Whether people are leaving their homeland to flee political persecution, escape a natural disaster, maximize returns to human capital, or overcome missing or failed markets will determine much about the configuration of human, social, and cultural capital that immigrants bring with them and the strategies they then employ to advance their interests in American society. The ability of different groups to advance their interests, whatever they may be, is also conditioned by the context of reception, which includes government policies that determine an immigrant's legal status (such as temporary worker, asylee, refugee, undocumented immigrant, or permanent resident alien), the point of insertion into the labor market (primary, secondary, or enclave), residential location (size of community, kind of neighborhood), and patterns and levels of racial and ethnic discrimination (in various markets). All of these factors must be considered when testing the concept of segmented assimilation, not just race and racial discrimination.

My second reservation is that the analysis too quickly dismisses race as a structuring factor in the experience of second-generation immigrants. Mollenkopf notes that households headed by neither native-born nor immigrant

---

Douglas S. Massey is a professor of sociology and public affairs at Princeton University.  
<[dmassey@princeton.edu](mailto:dmassey@princeton.edu)>

The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Federal Reserve Bank of New York or the Federal Reserve System.

blacks have the lowest mean household incomes, and that Hispanics—primarily Puerto Ricans, who are not generally black—occupy that position. Moreover, he observes that households headed by Dominicans also suffer as much or more on many measures than those headed by African-Americans, and they too generally say they are not black. I do not believe, however, that these results by themselves justify the conclusion that race is not a salient, perhaps even a predominant, factor in determining the experience of second-generation immigrants in New York City.

For one thing, the fact that immigrant blacks are better off than Puerto Ricans and Dominicans does not negate the hypothesis that immigrants are stratified along racial lines, because the tabulations presented in the paper do not control for the selectivity of the original migration or the structuring elements in the context of reception. Whereas Puerto Rican migration to the U.S. mainland was overwhelmingly working and lower class, black Caribbean immigrants were generally selected from the lower professional and middle classes. Moreover, although Dominicans tend to have higher class origins than do Puerto Ricans, they are nonetheless generally less selected than black Caribbeans, and a larger share of families in this population are undocumented. In order to conclude that race is not a major factor influencing outcomes such as income and school enrollment in the second generation, we really need more sophisticated regression models that control for the human, social, and cultural capital possessed by different immigrant groups. Even then, there is always the possibility that unobserved heterogeneity arising from variation in the auspices of departure could bias estimates of racial effects. Given the analysis conducted in Mollenkopf's paper, we are not really in a very good position to judge the relative importance of race as a factor in the experience of immigrants and their children in New York City.

I also question the wisdom of pointing to poor outcomes among Puerto Ricans and Dominicans as evidence to challenge the hypothesis of racial hegemony. This strategy is problematic

because both populations contain large numbers of people who are descended from forebears of African origin. Even though relatively few respondents in either group may identify themselves as "black," that does not mean that native white Americans would not put them in this racial category and treat them accordingly, subjecting them to higher levels of discrimination than other immigrants. The fact that most Puerto Ricans and Dominicans identify themselves as "other race" reflects the Caribbean conceptualization of race as a continuum from white to black rather than the dichotomous conceptualization that historically has prevailed in the United States; it does not mean that they have no African ancestry. In fact, when one compares socioeconomic outcomes among Caribbean Hispanics who identify themselves as white, other, or black, one generally finds that those in the "other" category lie much closer in status to blacks than to whites, suggesting the operation of distinctly racialized processes (see Massey and Bitterman [1983] and Denton and Massey [1989]).

What Mollenkopf's paper ultimately presents are some interesting tabulations that document differentials in income and education by generational status, race, ethnicity, and family background in New York. However, these data are insufficient by themselves to test the model of segmented assimilation, which incorporates many other structuring elements besides race into its explanatory model. Simple cross-classifications are also insufficient to judge the relative importance of race itself as a stratifying agent without the introduction of controls into much more complicated statistical models. Segmented assimilation theory may or may not ultimately hold up when subject to systematic scrutiny using data from the Immigrant Second Generation in Metropolitan New York study, but the tabulations presented represent only the very first steps in a much longer journey to examine that theory.

## REFERENCES

*Denton, N. A., and D. S. Massey.* 1989. "Racial Identity among Caribbean Hispanics: The Effect of Double Minority Status on Residential Segregation." *AMERICAN SOCIOLOGICAL REVIEW* 54, no. 5 (October): 790-808.

*Massey, D. S., and B. Bitterman.* 1983. "Explaining the Paradox of Puerto Rican Segregation." *SOCIAL FORCES* 64, no. 2 (December): 306-31.

*Portes, A., and R. G. Rumbaut.* 2001. *LEGACIES: THE STORY OF THE IMMIGRANT SECOND GENERATION*. Berkeley: University of California Press and New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

*Portes, A., and M. Zhou.* 1993. "The New Second Generation: Segmented Assimilation and Its Variants." *THE ANNALS OF THE AMERICAN ACADEMY OF POLITICAL AND SOCIAL SCIENCES* 530: 74-97.

*The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Federal Reserve Bank of New York or the Federal Reserve System. The Federal Reserve Bank of New York provides no warranty, express or implied, as to the accuracy, timeliness, completeness, merchantability, or fitness for any particular purpose of any information contained in documents produced and provided by the Federal Reserve Bank of New York in any form or manner whatsoever.*